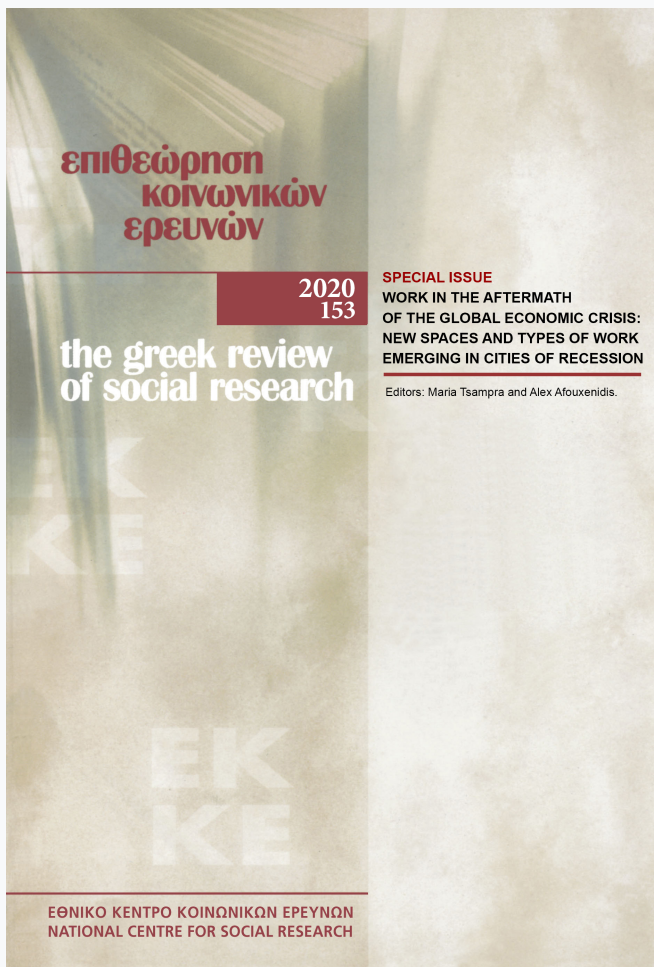


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Creative entrepreneurship and urban space: Exploring the location preferences of creative professionals in Athens during the economic recession

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Creative entrepreneurship and urban space: Exploring the location
preferences of creative professionals in Athens during the economic recession

ABSTRACT

Academic scholarship has scrutinised the triangle connecting creativity, locality and economic activity in three ways. First, the clustering of firms has been found to promote creativity in an urban environment (cf. clustering theories). Second, and indicating an inverse course of action, creative individuals have been found to foster the economic growth of cities by attracting employers to places where the former want to reside (cf. creative class theory). Third, the specific attributes of a location, in particular urban environments, have been shown to have a positive impact on individual creativity. Our study adds to this fascinating liaison by exploring: the economic and non-economic features that lead to designers establishing their businesses in Athens' city centre; and the perceived direct and indirect benefits of these locational factors in relation to the creative labour of these entrepreneurs. In this way, we merge micro and macro perspectives on the relationship between creative entrepreneurship and place, but in a potentially experimental setting, given that the urban fabric in Athens had to be reconstructed after it experienced economic and social turbulence following the 2008/2009 economic crisis and the austerity measures that were the result.

Keywords: *Athens, crisis, creative economy, location decisions*

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Δημιουργική επιχειρηματικότητα και αστικός χώρος: Εξερευνώντας τις προτιμήσεις εγκατάστασης των δημιουργικών επαγγελματιών στην Αθήνα κατά τη διάρκεια της οικονομικής ύφεσης

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Οι σχέσεις μεταξύ της δημιουργικότητας, του χώρου και της οικονομικής δραστηριότητας έχει εξεταστεί με πολλούς τρόπους στην ακαδημαϊκή έρευνα. Από τη μια πλευρά, η συσπείρωση επιχειρήσεων σε έναν τόπο έχει βρεθεί ότι προάγει τη δημιουργικότητα στο αστικό περιβάλλον (βλέπε θεωρίες clustering). Από την άλλη πλευρά, τα δημιουργικά άτομα φαίνεται ότι ενθαρρύνουν την οικονομική ανάπτυξη των πόλεων, έλκοντας εργοδότες σε μέρη όπου επιθυμούν να διαμείνουν. Και τρίτον, τα ειδικά χαρακτηριστικά ενός τόπου, ιδιαίτερα των αστικών τόπων, έχουν αποδειχθεί ότι έχουν θετικό αντίκτυπο στην ατομική δημιουργικότητα. Η μελέτη μας προσπαθεί να εμπλουτίσει την παραπάνω σχέση, διερευνώντας τους οικονομικούς και μη οικονομικούς παράγοντες που ωθούν δημιουργικούς εργαζομένους να επιλέξουν το κέντρο της Αθήνας ως τόπος εγκατάστασης των επιχειρήσεών τους και τα άμεσα και έμμεσα οφέλη αυτών των παραγόντων σε σχέση με τη δημιουργική τους εργασία. Με αυτόν τον τρόπο συγχωνεύουμε τις μικρο- και μακρο απόψεις που υπάρχουν για τη σχέση μεταξύ δημιουργικής επιχειρηματικότητας και τόπου σε ένα περιβάλλον που μπορεί να έχει πειραματικό χαρακτήρα, δεδομένου ότι ο αστικός ιστός στην Αθήνα έπρεπε να αναδημιουργηθεί λόγω της οικονομικής κρίσης του 2009 και των επακόλουθων μέτρων λιτότητας.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Αθήνα, κρίση, δημιουργική οικονομία, επιλογή τόπου εγκατάστασης

1. INTRODUCTION

Creativity is considered to be one of the driving forces of economic development, and creative individuals are often seen as key agents in neighbourhood revitalisation and improving urban competitiveness (e.g., Jacobs, 1969; Lloyd, 2002; Currid, 2007). Indeed, many local governments encourage the development of stimulating cultural districts or clusters by, and for, such individuals (e.g., Braun and Lavanga, 2007; Lavanga, 2020). In the context of the new knowledge-based economy, the question of where creativity is “localised” has become a pressing research topic, concomitant with the considerable attention devoted by policymakers to both the location choices of firms and spatial clustering processes (e.g., Ketels and Memedovic, 2008). In terms of the latter, two explanations compete: one that refers to agglomeration economies, or the location choices made by *firms* (cf. Scott, 2010); and the other to urban amenities, or the location choices made by *individuals*, who are then followed there by firms (cf. Florida, 2002). Traditionally, economic geographers have used the concept of “agglomeration economies” to explain the spatial clustering of industries. According to clustering theory, clusters will emerge because of the external economies of scale that arise from firms co-locating with other companies operating in the same industry (localisation economies, Marshall, 1920; Porter, 2000). The second explanation originates in Richard Florida’s theory of the creative class and the quality of place. This suggests that the quality of a place, or the bundle of social characteristics and amenities that define and shape its identity and render it attractive to the “creative class”, is a key determinant of what draws creative individuals to particular localities (Florida, 2002). Firms in need of this type of human capital then settle where these people choose to reside. The elements that attract the creative class include a tolerant and open social atmosphere, the presence of cultural amenities and activities, a vibrant nightlife, and ethnic diversity.

Cities appear to be places where creativity and innovation emerge and flourish, and where the social reproduction of a highly skilled and creative workforce occurs (Pratt, 2004; Scott, 2010). The concept of “creative cities” (e.g., Landry and Bianchini, 1995; Hall, 2000; Landry, 2000) has become increasingly prevalent in urban cultural policies in recent years, leading to an amalgamation of novel practices in cities with different goals: attracting the creative class; developing creative clusters; and establishing culture-led regeneration processes. Scott (2006) examined the

relationship between changing technologies, structures of production and labour markets on the one hand, and the dynamics of locational agglomeration on the other, arguing that the creative dynamism in local labour-market relationships and inter-firm networks is significantly boosted by the place itself. So, according to Scott (2010), “place” refers not only to the spatial conglomeration of industrial capabilities and skills, but also to sources of knowledge, traditions, memories and images. As such, a place is not just a local economy, but also: a physical environment expressed in streetscapes and the architecture of buildings; a social milieu with social and cultural amenities (museums, art galleries, theatres, shopping and entertainment facilities, etc.); and a location for the socio-political pressures arising from the reproduction of capital, especially at times of economic crisis and austerity measures. Cultural economies, then, are places where many aspects of human capital and leisure are interrelated in a way that could lead to complex urban ecologies (Scott, 2010; Niedomysl and Hansen, 2000; Lloyd and Clark, 2001).

One aspect of the many things that typically characterise creative clusters is the sense that there is “something in the air” and a “buzz” in a place itself and its activities (Scott, 2010; Drake, 2003). These atmosphere features tend to coexist with pleasurable socialisation processes and lively fluxes of knowledge (e.g., Currid, 2007). Berlin is an example of this, being a place where artists and creative individuals started to “colonise” and “gentrify” specific areas after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Grésillon, 1999, Bader and Bialluch, 2009; Heebels and van Aalst, 2010). Likewise, in response to the recent financial crisis and austerity measures in Greece, Athens, which is sometimes marked as the “New Berlin” (e.g., Vronti, 2016), has seen a steady rise of a creative workforce consisting of highly flexible freelancers and micro-firms seeking to adopt, or (re)start, activities in the city centre, especially in the so-called more deprived areas (Metaxourghio-Kerameikos, Omonoia square etc.) (Avdikos, 2014).

Part of the Athenian creative buzz of the last ten years is also connected to the economic crisis, which took root in the most brutal and intense way in the heart of the Greek capital and its neighbourhoods: the rapidly rising rates of unemployment and poverty created a “bankrupt” urban landscape; and urban policies intensified economic inequality and new poverty, social exclusion and socio-spatial segregation, the rapid growth of homelessness, and racial violence.

At the same time, a strong, yet diverse, social movement turned Athens into a battlefield of conflicting interests, where grassroots' dynamics played a significant role in the spatialisation of resistance in the city's public space (e.g., the December 2008 revolt, the Squares' movement in 2011, and neighbourhood assemblies). In this context, an emerging "right to the city" was a collective claim that could not "be divorced from" the "kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values" people desire (Harvey, 2008: 23). The need and the action to reclaim hegemony over state power, the capital and the enclosure of commons (de Angelis, 2013) made Athens a vibrant socio-political laboratory that attracted the attention of different groups of people, both locals and from abroad, including activists, researchers and artists.

In this article, we draw from the clustering and creative class theories to explore how and why creativity becomes localised in a place. More precisely, we seek to address this issue based on the features that creative entrepreneurs – who are the first-movers in such localisation processes (e.g., Bader and Bialluch, 2009) – choose and use to evaluate the place where they want to operate (e.g., Brydges and Hrac, 2019). We argue that the individuals who start and/or run a small business, particularly in the more commercial segments of the creative industries (including design, advertisement and photography), are of special interest for a study of the localisation of creativity. This is because these people are both firms that need to *organise labour and lower their operational costs by entering into specific localisation economies*, and members of the creative class who want a pleasant environment for their *leisure-time* activities. We know that designers are particularly attracted to the aesthetics within urban environments, because these visual characteristics provide a source of inspiration for their work (Drake, 2003). We do not, however, know if designers who are also business owners have similar preferences, or if their location choices are related to their labour/leisure trade-off and contribute to a better work/life balance and, if so, how. This article scrutinises designers' preferences for, and perceptions of, their current location in Athens' city centre, as well as their views on how the area's creative urban ecology functions as a whole. Doing so enables us to unravel the economic and non-economic features that lead to creative entrepreneurs establishing their businesses in the centre of Athens, and the perceived direct and indirect benefits of these locational factors in relation to

their work (Wenting et al., 2011; Markusen, 2014). Our research uses a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews, to which we add content analyses of our interviewees' most prominent communication channels. Highlighting together the macro-level characteristics of the environment and the micro-level features of the entrepreneur and his/her business adds to what is understood of the creativity-locality-economic activity triangle. Athens, as an extreme, almost experimental, setting may be particularly salient for revealing the ways in which the uniqueness of place plays a role in economic activity (Drake, 2003). This is because a thorough reshuffling of parts of the economic and social order occurred there during and after the global economic crisis of 2008/2009.

2. THEORY

2.1. *Agglomeration economies and their characteristics*

A recent phenomenon is the geographic concentration of firms within an industry as a never-ending process that continuously evolves over time (Ketels and Memedovic, 2008). In his work about the externalities of specialist industrial locations, Marshall (1920) proposed three main reasons why similar companies locate in the same area. First, local knowledge spill-overs between firms in clusters have several advantages arising from the flow of information and ideas (Wenting et al., 2011). Second, co-location reduces transaction costs, as well as the costs of inputs and transportation. Third, firms that cluster in an area benefit from the availability of local specialist labour, which reduces recruitment costs (Wenting et al., 2011). In line with Marshall's theorising, scholars have regularly acknowledged that agglomeration economies emerge from firms' spatial concentration and, particularly, from the economic benefits this provides (Simmie, 2004). Porter (2000), for example, has suggested that new enterprises tend to aggregate in existing clusters, rather than isolated locations, in order to take advantage of cost efficiencies.

In a similar vein, Scott (2006) explained that agglomeration economies have their roots in the great diversity of economic phenomena, which can include infrastructural facilities, networks, local labour markets, rivalry, trust, and knowledge exchanges. Moreover, the concept of "related variety" contributes to a better understanding of the location decisions made by businesses (Frenken et al., 2007). In industrial terms, related variety is defined and formed by the co-location of

manufacturing sectors that have common or complementary skills in a specific knowledge field.

The concept has recently been applied to the creative industries (Lazzeretti et al., 2010), supporting the notion that a certain degree of cognitive proximity makes room for effective communication and interactive learning in different industries, contributing to a greater capacity to absorb innovations from neighbouring sectors through cross-fertilisation (ibid).

Putting the economic dimensions of location decisions to the fore, these theoretical approaches suggest that the existence of agglomeration economies may be seen as a way to attract innovative entrepreneurs, for reasons including a cluster's usually low entry barriers and the great potential to create economic value from the pool of ideas and skills. Furthermore, the risks facing new entrants are perceived to be surmountable, due to the likelihood of developing valuable relationships, the existence of various potential customers, and the presence of other firms that act as role models (Porter, 2000). In brief, clustering helps to facilitate inter-firm activities and enhances local labour-market operations by engendering contact and communication between different companies.

2.2. Creative class theory and the quality of place

The part played by cultural amenities and a vibrant creative environment in industrial location decisions and urban economic growth has long been recognised. Jacobs (1969) was among the first social scientists to identify the connection between creativity, bohemian diversity and a vibrant city life. Ever since, economic geographers have acknowledged the relationship between cultural amenities, human capital and innovative industries. Richard Florida's influential concept of the 'creative class' proposed an alternative approach to the classic human-capital theory by endorsing creativity as a key driver of economic and urban development. Florida (2002) argues that economic growth is most likely to occur in places that are populated by creative individuals. As a result, he maintains that cities should no longer attempt to attract industrial players, but ought to instead target creative and knowledge-based occupations and, as a consequence, attract creative people whose presence would eventually foster economic growth. A key ingredient in this strategy

requires cities to offer a high “quality of place” that consists of a positive atmosphere, well-maintained public spaces, and a wide variety of urban and cultural amenities. These elements, Florida argues (2002), are the key determinants of the location decisions made by creative individuals, and cities should invest in them better if they want to achieve a significant presence and geographic concentration of these so-called bohemians. Indeed, such places possess the basic characteristics that allow individuals (including entrepreneurs) to make immediate use of many of the available resources. Furthermore, these places are orientated towards self-expression and being open to experiences, which are the key psychological traits of many creative individuals and entrepreneurs (Florida, 2002). Specifically, these people are drawn to a place by features such as thick labour markets, appealing lifestyles, social interaction, diversity, authenticity, identity, and quality (including a variety of urban and cultural amenities). A vibrant nightlife, mixed populations, various scenes, charming neighbourhoods and authenticity are likewise among the attributes that appeal to creative people, and also happen to be qualities that are conducive to innovation, risk-taking and establishing new businesses. As such, the gathering of people, companies and resources into specific places with particular characteristics engenders efficiencies and innovation, which can together foster economic growth (Florida, 2002).

It is well-known that Florida’s theory has received plenty of criticism by commentators who have argued that attracting the creative class is not a key factor in economic development, particularly when the supply of well-educated creatives vastly exceeds demand and leads to high levels of unemployment, as evidenced in the example of Berlin (e.g., Moretti, 2012). Elaborating on these critical accounts or the direction of the causality is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, using the case of Athens’ city centre, we will explore which of these elements or other qualities lead to creative entrepreneurs being attracted to a place and choosing to move to and remain there.

2.3. *Why do creatives cluster?*

The main clustering/agglomeration theories tend to focus on industrial or commercial clustering, and not so much on the clustering of art and creativity-related activities and businesses (Durmaz, 2015). However, creative activities and services are becoming key assets of contemporary urban economies, and are also part of a city’s

matrix (Lavanga, 2004; van der Borg et al., 2005). Creative firms can also be very dependent on the proximity of other companies, which gives them competitive advantages based on knowledge exchanges and networking. As Comunian (2011) argues, the emergence of specific spatial structures that regulate and inform the environment is one of the elements characterising the creative infrastructure of a city. Such agglomeration zones of artistic and creative production have been coined “creative clusters” (Evans, 2009). Most commonly, these clusters are located in the inner city, encompassing historic, socio-cultural entertainment, museum, multi-media and design, and music and theatre quarters (Evans, 2009; Comunian 2011; Comunian et al., 2010; Lavanga, 2013; Lavanga, 2020; Stern and Seifert, 2010). There are, however, differences between the characteristics and locational choices of creative firms and entrepreneurs in diverse regions and cities across the globe. Rozentale and Lavanga (2014) argue in favour of a context- and place-specific analysis: “place-specific environments impact on the nature of creative industries in a city” (p. 62). This seems to be more relevant for Athens, as the financial crisis rapidly changed both the economic environment and the socio-political atmosphere.

The economic reasons why creative industries tend to cluster in particular urban areas are manifold, with one being the fact that they are typically labour-intensive, as much project-based work requires a pool of specialist workers (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). Scott (2004) asserts that creative industries can benefit from inter-firm labour migration or informal contact between members of different firms as a way to enhance the flow of ideas and creativity. Creative clusters can also provide entrepreneurs with a flexible workforce that possesses both expertise and creativity, occasioning low labour costs and high productivity (Heebels and van Aalst, 2010). Other authors have underscored the importance of social relationships within clusters, maintaining that clustering results from a combination of economic opportunities and social integration. More specifically, creative clusters are regarded as contexts of trust, socialisation, knowledge exchange, innovation, and safe shelters in an uncertain and competitive business climate. The fact that a place is not only an economic environment, but also a social milieu, may be particularly relevant in the creative industries, where many freelancers and the self-employed have indistinct boundaries between their professional lives and their social identities as artists, bohemians or entrepreneurs (Scott, 2010; McRobbie, 2002). Indeed, while economic theory hypothesises that the labour/leisure trade-off is a rational, time-

allocation decision made by workers, creative professionals have actually been found to have a strong preference for work over leisure time (Throsby and Zednik, 2011), which may inform their location decisions in a different way to those made by conventional firms: their work-preference ideals may well affect their pursuit of a work environment that not only has purely economic benefits, but also contributes to an improved work/life balance (McRobbie, 2002; Oakley et al., 2017). Scott (2010) recognised that a place is a local economy, social milieu and physical environment with a particular aesthetic and architectural signature. Adopting his approach, we seek to reveal which of these dimensions play a role in the location decisions made by creative entrepreneurs in Athens, who are predominantly passionate workers confronted with the challenges of precarious work conditions, restricted entrepreneurial awareness and an imperfect work/life balance (Oakley et al., 2017; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013).

Drake (2003) sought to identify which of a place's attributes stimulate individual creativity, and to what extent workers in creative industries acknowledge the place as a source of inspiration. As well as some clear economic advantages of being localised in a specific place (e.g., the marketing advantages mentioned above), Drake's micro-level of analysis identified very specific stimuli of the aesthetic creativity of workers in the craft metalwork and digital design sectors in the UK. These prompts include visual stimuli, intense sociality and local traditions, which can all contribute to a place's "buzz" and brand image. Taken together, and in line with the clustering and creative class theories and recent hypothesising about localised individual creativity, our study investigates the characteristics of the "urban creative ecology" of Athens, or "how place-based attributes can be a magnet for creative workers" (Drake, 2003), particularly accounting for the factors that encourage small business-owners in the design field to locate or remain in the city centre.

3. METHODS AND EMPIRICAL SETTING

The Greek urban and economic systems are characterised by the primacy of Athens as the country's largest metropolitan centre. As the capital city, Athens dominates Greece culturally, as almost all the important cultural institutions, infrastructure and major events are concentrated there. The region of Attiki, where Athens is located,

plays a leading role in the cultural and creative economy of Greece, with over 25,600 enterprises (57.3%), employing over 65,000 workers (61.3%), producing 75.5% of the gross value added (GVA: 1.6 billion euros) of the creative and cultural industries (CCIs) (Avdikos et al., 2017). More than 50% of the creative sectors' enterprises (e.g., publishing, design, video games, advertising, performing arts, fashion, TV and radio, and film and music) are located in Attiki. Indeed, Greek designers have a strong preference for this area, as about 67% of them reside there and about one third have chosen Athens as their daily place of work (Avdikos et al., 2015).

The economic and touristic power of Athens resides in its unique combination of roots in its ancient history and the breeding of a new, and growing daily, cultural and creative space. The emerging clustering phenomenon - so typical of the creative economy - can be observed in the city centre districts in particular (Avdikos, 2014). The inner-city area of Athens (with neighbourhoods like Psyrri, Gazi, Kerameikos, Metaxourgeio and Exarcheia) has always had characteristics that epitomised it as a creative pole, such as a large amount of cultural infrastructure, a combination of low rent- and real-estate prices, and an adequate number of available properties (Souliotis, 2013). The inner-city district of Athens has attracted little planned investment since the 2008 global financial crisis, but has nevertheless spontaneously become a creative quarter, mixing entertainment, consumption and production spaces that are mainly characterised by micro and small enterprises. The financial crash had many socio-spatial and cultural effects on both Athens and Greece overall (see, for instance, Skordili, 2013; Souliotis, 2013; Maloutas, 2014; Alexandri, 2015), as well as a significant impact on the local economy of the former, with a quarter of its enterprises shutting down between 2008 and 2012 (IME GSEVEE, 2013). These closures left a large stock of empty offices in the Athens' old commercial district, which is where most of the city's creative professionals have now moved, taking advantage of the low rents and establishing a new wave of prime gentrifiers. Conversely, Athens saw a massive rise in short-term rentals (AirBnB) after 2017, triggering residential gentrification and touristification processes (Balampanidis et al., 2019) that have caused the displacement of creative activities from certain neighbourhoods (e.g., Exarcheia and Koukaki).

All these features have created a unique socio-cultural atmosphere that combines: old industrial and craftsmanship architectural remnants; a number of

important cultural heritage sites (e.g., Acropolis); a local economy based on mainly micro and small businesses with a related variety of economic activities; a diverse flow of people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds; a number of major cultural infrastructures, such as concert halls, bars and restaurants; and the continuing processes of gentrification and displacement in/from certain neighbourhoods.

As the purpose of this article is to add to what is understood of the role played by the local environment in relation to creative entrepreneurs in Athens, we conducted a qualitative study using an inductive approach that focuses on the subjective interpretation of a situation. For the purposes of this article, creative entrepreneurs are defined as owners of firms in the commercial sectors of the creative industries (Table 1). Our sample consisted of 12 creative entrepreneurs who are artists and/or designers with business obligations, and who conceived, and own and manage, a micro-business that has been located in Athens' city centre for three to five years (see, also, Figure 1).

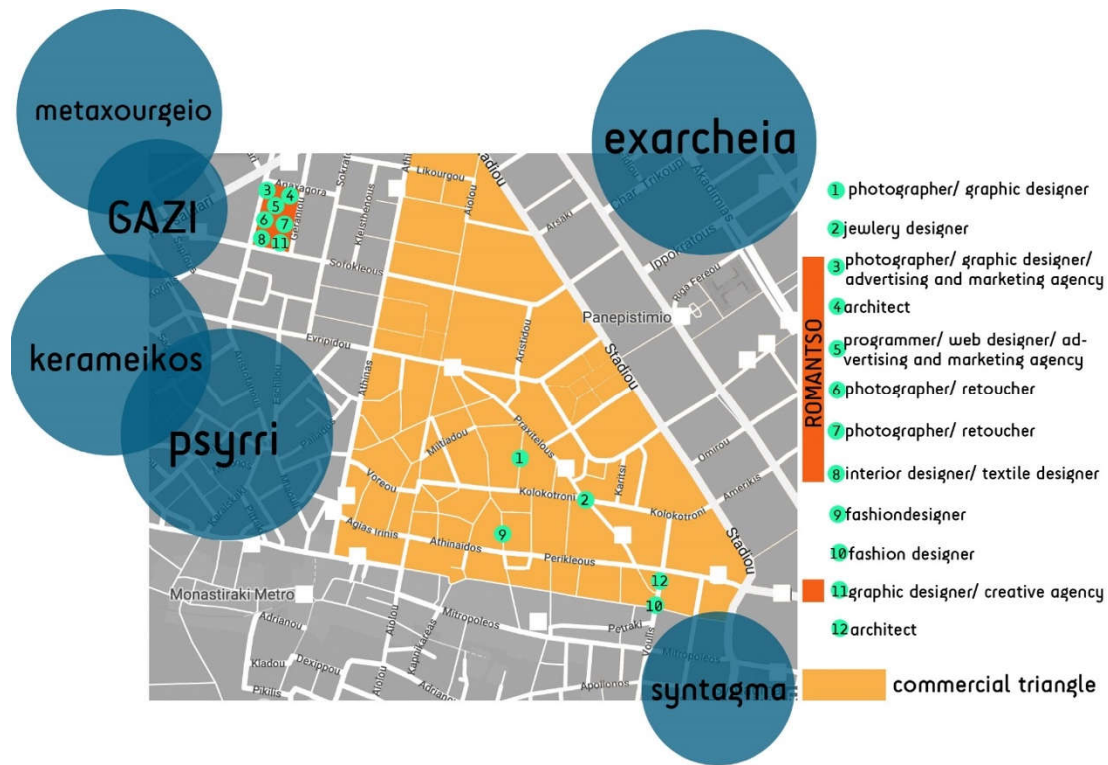
Table 1: *Interviewees*

| | Profession | Type of cultural product/service | Firm size | Year of founding/ year of moving into Athens City center |
|---|---|--|------------------|---|
| 1 | Photographer/ Graphic Designer | Showroom of Greek designers and photography services | <5 | 2013 |
| 2 | Jewelry Designer | Handmade Jewelry | >5 | 2014 |
| 3 | Photographer/ Graphic Designer/ Advertising and Marketing Agency | Visual and corporate identities for clients by graphic design of websites, product logo, posters, books, magazines, exhibitions etc. | <5 | 2014 |
| 4 | Architect | Architectural advice and design for buildings and urban districts | <5 | 2014 |
| 5 | Programmer/ Web Designer/ Advertising and Marketing Agency | Visual and corporate identities for clients by design of websites and house-styles, design of books, magazines, exhibitions, etc. | <5 | 2014 |
| 6 | Photographer/ Retoucher | Photographs, digital images and digital photo editing, photographic artwork | <5 | 2014 |
| 7 | Photographer/ Retoucher | Photographs, digital images and digital photo editing – Photoshop, photographic artwork | <5 | 2014 |

| | | | | |
|----|--|---|----|------|
| 8 | Interior Designer/ Textile Designer | Textile design for interior design objects, Textile as Art | <5 | 2014 |
| 9 | Fashion Designer | Unique pieces of clothes and accessories | <5 | 2012 |
| 10 | Fashion Designer | Handcrafted leather accessories | <5 | 2011 |
| 11 | Graphic Designer/ Creative Agency | Visual and corporate identities for clients by design of websites and house-styles, design of books, magazines, exhibitions, etc. | <5 | 2014 |
| 12 | Architect | Architectural advice and design for buildings and urban districts | <5 | 2014 |

Data were collected by way of face-to-face, in-depth anonymous interviews, which gave the respondents the chance to express their nuanced and detailed opinions. The interviews took place in the interviewees' workplaces between April and May 2016; were conducted in Greek by one of the authors; and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, and to triangulate the data, we also conducted content analyses of the participants' most prominent communication channels (including websites and Instagram accounts) to identify if and how they use their location. The businesses of all the interviewees were situated around Athens' historical city centre, with half of them in Romantso, a co-working space close to one of the city's central squares, Omonoia. More specifically, they were concentrated in certain streets in the old commercial district (Evrpidou, Kolokotroni, and Praxitelous), which are where creative entrepreneurs are increasingly locating (Avdikos and Iliopoulou, 2019).

Figure 1: *Places of interviewees and areas of interest*



The focus of our study was on the neighbourhood rather than the metropolitan level (Durmaz, 2015). More precisely, it was on parts of the city centre that were not originally designated as cultural production districts, but now have a high concentration of creative firms (Smit, 2011).

4. FINDINGS

4.1. *Place as a local economy*

Like other types of firm, and in line with the premises of agglomeration and clustering theories, we found that our creative entrepreneurs in Athens took great account of economic factors related to cost and productivity when making their location decisions. The recession that occurred in the aftermath of the economic crisis means that *rents* are still low in many parts of the city centre, where countless buildings are charmingly worn with age and appeal to creative sectors as an affordable option. Those in our sample choosing a creative co-working space (Romantso) were attracted by the *sharing of facilities* as a way of reducing input costs; those opting for a private space took into account the proximity to the city centre and the transit of potential customers, for which they were willing to pay a premium. Those with a B2C

(business to consumers) orientation specifically took into account the presence of customers, who are often tourists. *Transportation costs* also played a role; a fashion designer stated that this was the major reason for relocating. As such, the *centrality*, *proximity* and *accessibility* of a place are decisive factors: an inner-city location offers access from every part of the city, as well as optimal (public) transportation modalities. For many of the interviewees, their workspace was close to home, facilitating efficiency in the daily work process. Nevertheless, two identified downsides due to the centrality of the location, e.g., traffic congestion and restrictive ordinances in relation to access. Furthermore, not all the entrepreneurs agreed that *proximity to customers* is a decisive location factor; those working in digital creative agencies and architecture regarded a location as just a place to work, because their clients can be situated all over the city, country and even the world. As one of the interviewees stated (respondent 11):

[...] we make a magazine for a client, but the client doesn't come here, or, if he does, it will only be after an appointment or to attend an event related to his business [...] the rest of the firms that are located here, and are more B2C, will benefit more from the proximity to customers [...].

The *proximity to key suppliers and raw materials* and *the availability of a specialist labour market pool* were very important, but only for the fashion and interior designer interviewees. Indeed, the fact that the centre of Athens is full of small shops belonging to seamstresses, fabric merchants, and suppliers of buttons, ribbons and other accessories was an important location factor for one of the respondents, an interior and textile designer. We expect that proximity to key suppliers and raw materials will become more important in the near future, especially for interior, textile and fashion designers. Sustainability concerns and the move towards a circular economy may trigger local production, manufacturing and the opening of more businesses that repair damaged garments (Pratt et al., 2012; Brydges et al., 2018; Janssens and Lavanga, 2018). Furthermore, the interviewees recognised that co-location and the presence of a thick labour market indirectly increase and facilitate socio-professional networking and *knowledge-exchange* opportunities. Moreover, the co-location of businesses with complementary offerings seemed to facilitate interactive learning between our designers and their suppliers (related variety).

The importance of location as a home for networking opportunities appeared to be concomitant with our interviewees' stage of development. Avdikos and Iliopoulou (2019) refer to this relationship (location and professional development stage) as a two-phase process that has at its core a creative freelancer's level of professional risk: a "professional growing up" stage, where creative professionals attempting to operate on their own bear a high professional risk; and a "professional adulthood" phase, where the freelancer already has a mature portfolio, a stable clientele and an expanded professional network, all of which are associated with a reduced professional risk. Indeed, during the growing up phase of their businesses, almost all of our respondents had a great need for feedback and *cooperation* with other creatives, and with friends and acquaintances from within their direct environments. During this stage, and to help them grow their business and reduce risk, the interviewees sought to build an initial network of colleagues and suppliers/clients and to become part of the local creative buzz. In general, Athens' city centre provides an opportunity to construct that initial network through its dense concentration of creative businesses from all the CCIs. When the businesses of our creative entrepreneurs matured (professional adulthood phase), they tended to seek to replace very direct and local networks with those at a higher level, even nation- and worldwide, which are described as a kind of "global pipeline" by Bathelt et al. (2004). While national and international networks are important for creating a market for products and for cooperating with partner firms (Heebels and van Aalst, 2010), networks at the municipal level are still being used to gauge new ideas, contact cultural gatekeepers, and build a reputation. So, even when creative businesses move away from the centre of Athens, they attempt to maintain their professional networks there and still be part of the local buzz, not for unusual reasons, but mainly for social factors, as described below.

4.2. Place as a social milieu

Some economic benefits of a place are strongly linked to its social aspects. As an example, while location decisions may be influenced by the economic dimensions of a network, the socio-cultural elements of belonging to a creative community also have a direct impact on the locational behaviour of creative entrepreneurs. Our interviewees highlighted the importance of many of the neighbourhood characteristics

described by Florida (2002), such as the opportunities to experience face-to-face contact and social interactions and build trusted relationships. They also regularly mentioned the high levels of tolerance and openness, the diverse lifestyles and ethnic backgrounds, and the presence of cultural amenities, including a vibrant pub culture in the city centre. Our entrepreneurs also testified that, by locating to the city centre, they can get feedback and have easy and informal access to information and the exchange of knowledge. In general, personal contacts, mutual support, and a variety of cultural events and activities are the precursors to knowledge spill-overs. Despite the fact that virtual connectivity is recognised as an important asset that facilitates communication with (potential) clients and brokers, place-based, face-to-face contact and interpersonal communication are still regarded as irreplaceable (cf. Storper and Venables, 2004). Indeed, not only is face-to-face interaction an important way to attract and retain customers, but is also seen as a way to build an entrepreneurial identity through contact with other entrepreneurs. This facilitates learning, but there are also social and psychological benefits. All of our interviewees were freelancers, who are often perceived to be somewhat footloose in terms of their workplace (Smit, 2011). Even though many of them admitted that they could technically work from a home located elsewhere, they nevertheless wanted the benefits of a physical presence among peers to improve their status, reputation, professionalism and wellbeing. This confirms the finding by Pratt (2004) that space and place – and the associated sociality – possibly matter more, rather than less, for people working in the creative industries. Indeed, the creatives whose best companion is a computer screen (lonely eagles, Young, 1997) particularly seek an alternative to many lonely working hours. This was corroborated by the owner of an advertising agency:

This place helps me to become more extrovert. I need it in my job, as it's quite a lonely job. I might sit and work in front of a computer screen for long hours...it's nice that now, during my breaks, I can go downstairs to the pub and have a brief chat with the tenants of this building or other people I'm likely to run into (respondent 1).

Even though this was rarely mentioned as a crucial factor in the interviewees' location decisions, the social mix of people of different ages, races and ethnic origins, sexual orientations, and appearances seemed to be significant to several of them. They valued the mix of people as a source of inspiration, excitement and positive energy

within the community. Alternatively, they recognised in this social mix a sign of the broad-mindedness, openness, and tolerance of the environment in which they worked. The interviewees located in Romantso especially enjoyed this mix of influences in the historical city centre, which is where many immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds live and work.

The appeal of a place can also be associated with the diversity of its entertainment and cultural offerings. Most of our interviewees regarded the pub culture and urban amenities as meeting places where they have informal contact with others from within or without their creative circle, or just as facilities for their personal enjoyment. These amenities were not, however, primary factors in their location decisions. As Currid (2007) points out in her book “The Warhol Economy”, locally grounded scenes foster a vibrant and lively urban atmosphere by means of which they contribute to a creative environment and the “buzz” of a place. Our interviews included one open-ended question – “Why did you choose this place for your firm’s location?” – to obtain the respondents’ spontaneous reactions. This elicited a response from almost all of them along the lines of: “This is where it’s happening”. The following quote particularly illustrates this: “If you locate to the inner-city neighbourhood, then you appreciate the hustle and bustle of the city and the marketplace there; everything’s happening here, you can find everything here...” (respondent 1). Statements like this clearly reflect the notion that there is a “tendency [of a city centre] to engender multiplicity, flux and unexpected events or experiences” (Scott, 2001, p. 12). This contributes to an atmosphere, but also to the resource mobilisation processes that creative entrepreneurs are confronted with when developing their activities in a market. Drake (2003) also identifies the spirit or “zeitgeist” of a place as a source of creativity that emerges from the frequency and intensity of social and cultural contacts, which include, but are not limited to, those with other designers. As a result, these places do not serve as a way to job hunt for these creative entrepreneurs, as Florida (2012) suggests; instead, hovering at the interface of leisure and labour, and by fostering sociality, these amenities function as cases that contribute to work, pleasure, and a healthy work/life balance, and can sometimes help to reduce some of the precariousness faced by creative freelancers.

4.3. Place as a physical environment

The physical and spatial characteristics of a place include its visual features and buildings. These physical attributes were among the primary factors affecting the location decisions of many of our interviewees, with the majority appreciating the physical built environment, and the historical and architectural diversity. The designers who met clients at their premises wanted to do so in an appealing physical environment. However, the authenticity of the area, with its mix of old and new buildings, was mainly valued as a great source of aesthetic stimulus and inspiration. For some, their location decision was strongly related to the architecture of their workspace, as explained by respondent 1:

The main reason we chose this place – even though it was more expensive than the average rent in the neighbourhood – was because of the special characteristics of this building. The fact that it's a loft space, the high ceiling, these tall iron-frame windows that allow the sun to come in every day...Can you imagine how much this window often affects my daily mood?

The attributes of the physical environment, both indoors and outdoors, clearly have the capacity to improve wellbeing. This is a phenomenon that also occurs in travel behaviour concerning destination choices, and has been referred to as “place happiness” (Deutsch-Burgner et al., 2014). The attractiveness of the built environment may be particularly salient for our designers, as they seek inspiration and may be very sensitive to visual and aesthetic impulses. Our findings are in line with those of Drake (2003), who found that creative professionals benefit from the visual prompts and signs in the urban environment. Indirectly, and as a source of inspiration, the physical setting affects productivity and outputs and, in this way, also has economic implications.

4.4 Place as a carrier of identity

In the context of investigating creative entrepreneurs' location decisions, it is important to see places not just as objective and real entities, but also as subjective, imagined and emotional phenomena (Drake, 2003). In their research, Heebels and van Aalst (2010) identified that the symbolic value of the environment, which encompasses both its physical and intangible characteristics, is an important element of the location decisions made by creative entrepreneurs. In the present study, each

interviewee had his/her perception of a place and sense of identity in relation to it. As one of our respondents stated:

I don't feel part of this place, I feel that this place is part of me. I've experienced life through this environment and everything that it entails – the ugliness, the violence, the roughness of the surroundings, the people that live here; in everything, there's an inner relationship with this place (respondent 3).

It appears from this comment that the interviewee has a transient sense of attachment and belonging to the place described. This familiarity was an important catalyst for the creativity of our respondents and part of a particular place's appeal. Place-based reputation and *tradition* provided inspiration to another interviewee, a jewellery designer, who felt that the locality's reputation and craft tradition affected her work; she wanted to take advantage of the long-established reputation that the area had in relation to handcrafting and jewellery design. Her motivation and inspiration came from the need and desire to absorb these place-based attributes, achieve design excellence in her work, and become part of a larger creative community that would last throughout history. As she explained:

I can see this place as part of the history. I imagine me and my jewellery brand as being remembered through history as one of the design movements in Athens or, even better, in Greece in this era. I see myself as part of a wide creative community that works not only for money, but also for the realm of jewellery design (respondent 2).

This deep connection with a place resonates with what Drake also recognised when he explained that “the reputation or traditions of a locality, which may contribute to a form of place-branding, can be used by creative workers as a stimulus to aesthetic creativity as well as a marketing tool” (Drake, 2003, p. 521). The desire to be involved in a community and establish a proper identity there may lead to initiatives that foster the creativity within a location and reproduce the Marshallian sense that “there is something in the air” in these inner-city neighbourhoods. As an example, a fashion designer told us about being part of a wider, yet loose, association of designers known as “by local Athens”, which aims to map and promote all the creative freelance activity taking place in Athens' city centre. This initiative wanted to turn the city centre into a vast community of cooperating and co-existing creatives,

but also creates a brand and a common label by which those involved can be recognised. Relevant collaboration initiatives flourished during Greece's economic recession. This was especially the case in the performing arts and other creative sectors like design, which saw the development of informal and formal networks of creatives and many co-working ventures, either in the form of small shared offices or even collaborative schemes that aimed to reduce levels of business precariousness (Avdikos and Kalogeresis, 2017).

Apart from experiencing a sense of community and being surrounded by creative individuals, being in the centre of Athens also contributed to the identity of some of our interviewees. As one explained: "Being in the city centre is a way of living and becomes a habit that you can't easily give up" (respondent 7). She added that specific types of people live and work in the city centre, and are different from those who live and work in other areas or the suburbs. As such, a place can encourage both the relatedness that people seek, as well as a sense of uniqueness vis-à-vis outsiders. Furthermore, from an economic perspective, being identified with a particular location can give creative entrepreneurs a comparative advantage and the opportunity to capitalise on being based in what is regarded as the "place to be".

5. DISCUSSION

The fascinating interplay between place, creativity and economic activity has led to a variety of research that combines diverse (micro and macro) perspectives on the direction of the causal relationships between the phenomena. The clustering (the primacy of economic benefits to firms) and creative class (social and societal characteristics first attract workers to an urban environment, who are then followed there by firms) theories have both scrutinised such processes mainly from a macro-economic angle, while the theorising of Drake (2003), Scott (2001, 2004, 2006, 2010) and others gives centre stage to micro-level processes. The present study sought to further disentangle the complicated associations within the urban space, creativity and economic activity triangle by: (1) merging the theoretical macro and micro perspectives; (2) studying small businesses in the creative industries, where the owner/founder and the venture tend to converge; and (3) choosing Athens as an extreme case, because of both the turbulence it experienced in the years after the 2008/9 economic crisis and the simultaneous rise of a creative wave.

A number of our outcomes relate to the creative ecology of an urban environment. Theoretically, our findings underpin the notion that clustering factors are indeed important determinants of the location preferences of creative entrepreneurs in Athens. The most prevalent of these elements can all be related to an economic rationale, and include: cheap rents; economies of scale resulting from shared facilities; the proximity to resources; and the brand reputation of a place. The fact that the designers in our sample were all business owners may explain the predominance of an economic orientation. Nevertheless, many of these economic factors also have side-effects, with the contribution made to an individual's social life and wellbeing particularly recognised. These consequences mainly reside in the beneficial outcomes of social networks and knowledge spill-overs. Inversely, our respondents used social interactions to accumulate different types of knowledge and information that they then capitalised on in their creative process, but this was also a way to acquire and maintain a reputation. Accordingly, it can be argued that local knowledge spill-overs in the creative urban ecology of Athens are closely related to social networking, as they act as channels for informal knowledge –and information– exchanges. In this way, the private economic benefits and social aspects of the workplace are closely connected, and not just mutually reinforcing, but also have emotional advantages. Indeed, the sociality found in creative urban environments may well contribute to the work/life balance of creative entrepreneurs who typically experience unclear boundaries between labour and leisure and sometimes work in “splendid” isolation (Throsby and Zednik, 2011; Oakley et al., 2017; McRobbie, 2002).

Inspiration is a key resource for creative workers, and they find this in social interactions, the visual environment and the traditions that a place still communicates. Adding to creative class theory, we propose that creative professionals consider the social and atmospheric qualities of the urban environment when making their location choices, while inspiration functions as a pertinent mediating factor. These visual and more ephemeral stimuli may particularly be present in places that revive after suffering turmoil, as was the case in Athens in the 2010s, but also in Berlin in the 1990s or Detroit in the 2010s. In line with scholars like Currid and Williams (2009), Scott (2001, 2004, 2006, 2010), and Drake (2003), the designers we interviewed wanted to be in a place they perceived to be where it all “happens”. Indeed, the

“buzz” around a place not only encourages people to settle there to benefit from the economies of attention that it generates, but also from its atmosphere and social aspects. In turn, these relate to the psychological and emotional elements of a place, which have been identified as a source of “place happiness” in travel-destination decisions, and have been shown, at times, to be equally or even more influential than physical characteristics (Deutsch-Burgner et al., 2014).

Overall, the distinction between the economic, social and spatial features of the urban environment may not be very strict. Our analysis leads us to propose three particular elements in relation to location choices that distinguish creative entrepreneurs from entrepreneurs in general and the more generic “creative class”. The first is the need to mingle with like-minded people and find trust, support and self-confidence in these interactions. This deep social need may act as compensation for the uncertainty that is often a part of work in the creative industries, and originates from concern about extended periods of unemployment between assignments (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013), as well as doubts about the reception given to goods and services that are typified by infinite variety and uncertain quality (the “nobody knows principle”, as described by Caves in 2000).

The second element distinguishing creative entrepreneurs from the creative class in general may be their sensitivity to a peculiar aesthetic that arises from the mix of the traditional with the exotic and the old with the new. So, along with the opportunities provided by empty buildings (e.g., Jacobs, 1969), or the authenticity that a place exudes (e.g., Florida, 2012), the sheer (yet atypical) beauty of an area is also a locational factor (cf. Drake, 2003). The third element lies in the fact that being located in what is regarded as ‘the place to be’ affects the goods and services that these creative entrepreneurs go on to develop: being part of the centre of attention of a place creates a competitive advantage, heightens interest and improves reputation, making a business stand out from the crowd. Artists and other creatives have often been found to be the first-movers (prime gentrifiers) to specific undervalued areas and places (think of Berlin), to which they are pushed because of financial shortcomings and pulled because they recognise the qualities of the environment that may not be apparent to those without a creative eye.

This leads us to the processes of urban renewal in which clustering takes centre stage. Clusters, as geographically proximate groups of interconnected

companies and their suppliers (Porter, 2000), have been recognised in the creative industries as emerging in settings that convey economic opportunities, vivid socialisation processes, and appealing and meaningful environments such as historic centres (Evans, 2009). Although our study was cross-sectional, it nevertheless allows us to theorise about the clustering process. In the process of the rehabilitation of a city like Berlin, artists were among the first movers to abandoned and dilapidated areas, where they sought cheap and appealing workspaces and inspiration (Bader and Bialluch, 2009; Heebels and van Aalst, 2010). It is not inconceivable, then, that designers are early second movers, attracted by similar factors, as well as by the presence of a clientele and proximity, and access to resources, which all contribute to the viability of their ventures. The fact that the majority of our interviewees said that they were attracted to Athens' city centre as the place to be suggests that the process of urban renewal had already started before they moved in.

Our study has identified that Athens' city centre fulfils four distinct, yet interrelated, roles in the eyes of creative entrepreneurs, namely as: a large local economy; a social milieu; a physical environment; and a container of identity. As such, the assertions of the leading theories are applicable. However, while the clustering and creative class approaches are rather generic in their depiction of social processes, the findings of our study enabled some differentiations to be made at the sector, business stage-of-development, and individual creative entrepreneur levels. First, a vital distinction can be made between product-oriented and service-oriented entrepreneurs in their adherence to specific economic criteria.

We expect that proximity to key suppliers and raw materials will become more important in the near future, especially for interior, textile and fashion designers. Sustainability concerns and the move towards a circular economy may trigger local production, manufacturing and the opening of more businesses that repair damaged garments (Pratt et al., 2012; Brydges et al., 2018; Janssens and Lavanga, 2018).

While the former (including our fashion, jewellery and interior designers) considered the proximity to their customers and suppliers to be an important location factor, as it may add to the productivity of their businesses (and we expect that this proximity will become more important in the near future, because of sustainability concerns and the move towards a circular economy), the latter (including those preoccupied with digital and media services) highlighted the prevalence of knowledge

spill-overs, networking and collaborations within a location. Second, the spatial and physical characteristics that affect location decisions, as underlined in clustering theory, were mediated by the type of occupation. In particular, our architects and graphic designers considered the appearance of the neighbourhood and their office spaces, with the aesthetic features typical of neoclassical and modern architecture, to be important determinants of their location choices. Our product-oriented entrepreneurs, such as fashion designers, valued places highly because of their centrality, visibility and role as a hub that attracts customers and intermediaries. Third, the age and career stage of the creative entrepreneur also played a significant role, with our findings suggesting that the older the entrepreneur, the more likely (s)he is to be sentimentally attached to the built environment and the people within it; for our older creatives, a place represents memories and tradition in such a way that nostalgia can become a source of inspiration for their work; for the youngest, the perceptual characteristics of a place are related more to its atmosphere and authenticity. By residing in these locations, these entrepreneurs consider themselves to be part of a creative community upon which they base and construct their creative identity. This is a manifestation of Florida's description of how creative workers are attracted to and stimulated by environments that allow them to build their personal identity on the basis of being among other creative people (Florida, 2012).

As to the specificity of Athens as a case, where the economic crisis and recession may have led to a temporary downturn or *tabula rasa* in relation to economic activity, we found that the main location preferences converged with those of creative individuals elsewhere. Nevertheless, the prominence of economic determinants was clear, which may be related to the fact that we also focused on small business owners. Nonetheless, the climate and atmosphere that were deemed to be important to our interviewees can mainly be attributed to the intrinsic beauty of the setting, the gathering of like-minded individuals, and bottom-up initiatives, rather than to rehabilitation interventions by the local government or private investors seeking to revitalise neighbourhoods. Moreover, the economic crisis and subsequent austerity measures seem to have fostered a creative wave in Athens' city centre, where our respondents took advantage of low rents and improved the creative atmosphere of the inner-city neighbourhoods. Austerity and recession can therefore also be regarded as

one of the drivers of the Athenian creative wave that bowled over the local creative buzz with a new flux and creative productions.

We must, however, acknowledge the limitations of our study, a major one of which relates to the small size of our sample. Although data saturation started to emerge after our interviews, a greater number of respondents, with clear distinctions between different types of designer, could have contributed further to our findings. Moreover, the existing literature has recognised that different places provide different stimuli, but how this occurs is far from understood. A comparative case study could thus have made additional contributions in this regard.

Finally, the study highlights more avenues for future research (in various settings) that controls for individual – (including age) and industry-level (including product versus service-orientation) characteristics. These include testing statistically: creative entrepreneurs' need for social interactions and a local support network; their sensitivity to the aesthetics of a place; and their preference for residing together in the place-to-be. Equally, the location decisions of first-movers and early second-movers can be scrutinised in empirical studies, testing the proposition that artists are more likely to belong to the first category than designers, who may be more inclined to only locate to places after some creative activity has already started to develop there. Additionally, while the present study may generalise the effects of Athens on creatives' location decisions, much scope remains for studies of: responses to situations of crisis, including the ways in which (creative) entrepreneurs react to setbacks; entrepreneurial resilience; and the characteristics of the entrepreneurs who are most likely to (easily) recover from such problems.

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